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LIMDIS

FOR AMBASSADOR FROM SULLIVAN

REF: VIENTIANE 9204

IN CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY IN EXECUTIVE SESSION EARLY THIS
YEAR, DOD TOLD HASC THAT PRESENT RESTRICTIONS ON BOMBING
NEAR TOWNS WERE AT REQUEST OF SOUVANNA AND THAT THEY WERE
WAIVED ONLY ON HIS CONCURRENCE. ASSUME YOU OBTAINED SISOUK'S
CLEARANCE (IN SOUVANNA'S ABSENCE FROM COUNTRY) PRIOR TO
LIFTING BAN DESCRIBED REFTTEL. ROGERS
BT

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14

cc: Sen. Ellender

Laos

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for use in



JOHN P. ROCHE

The Secret War in Laos

The "Secret War" in Laos popped up again in the Senate in a dialogue between Sen. Allen Ellender, chairman of the five-man committee that oversees U.S. intelligence operations, and Sen. J. W. Fulbright.

Fulbright inquired caustically whether Ellender was aware that the CIA had a private army in Laos, whether the watchdog committee was privy to the operation. Ellender's reply was a bit confused — the old protege of Huey Long is now 81 — but it could certainly be construed as a denial of knowledge.

Fulbright and his friends, who have been attacking executive autonomy, scored a rhetorical victory, though from another perspective one might argue that if the Senate "watchdog" goes to sleep, it is hardly a reflection on the President.

HOWEVER, the most interesting aspect of this exchange is that no literate American needs a watchdog committee to fill him in on the CIA's activities in Laos. All he needs is \$12.50 to purchase Arthur J. Dommen's "Conflict In Laos: The Politics of Neutralization" (Praeger), published last spring. If he is not feeling that strongly about the subject, he can probably get the book from a public library.

As indicated here before—in connection with the "Pentagon Papers"—there is an enormous and detailed corpus of scholarly writing on Indochina that makes most sensational "revelations" about American policy old stuff to anyone who has taken the trouble read. To cite but one example, the only thing the "Pentagon Papers" tell us about the anti-Diem coup that Robert Shaplen omitted in Chapter VI of his "The Lost Evolution" (1965) are the exact names of the players (which Shaplen, of course, knew but left out on prudential grounds).

To return to Laos, Dommen has provided readers with an inch-by-inch development of American involvement. His central thesis is that the reasonable policy for Laos is neutralization under Great-Power auspices, that (with a certain amount of wobbling) this became American and Soviet policy by 1962, but that Hanoi simply would not co-operate. As he carefully documents, from the day Ho Chi Minh and his cadres launched their insurgency against the French, the North Vietnamese set their sights on the creation of a Communist successor regime for the whole of Indochina, that is, for Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina in Vietnam proper, and for Laos and Cambodia.

TEMPORARILY FRUSTRATED at Geneva in 1954 because neither Moscow (which had a private deal underway with the French to scuttle the European defense community) nor Peking (which was licking its wounds from the Korean War) would support their demands, the North Vietnamese quietly proceeded to build up their forces for another round.

This involved securing the lines of communication to South Vietnam or — in terms of the topography of Indochina — the Laotian Panhandle, subsequently notable for the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And, as base areas for the Laotian guerrillas, the Pathet Lao, as well as North Vietnamese regulars, they took de facto sovereignty over the two Northern Laotian provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly.

But what interests us is the American response. Without going over familiar ground, it is fair to say that Dommen has missed nothing significant that occurred prior to 1969 (when I left the White House and access to intelligence materials). The whole story is there including the wild siege of Phou Pha Thi, the mountaintop in Sam Neua, where the U.S. had installed a beacon (right in the enemy heartland) to guide the bombers heading for North Vietnam. Also for the first time due credit has been given to Vang Pao and his Meo Army—usually dismissed as "mercenaries"—for their courage and tribal patriotism (Laos is not a "nation").

Whether our course of action was correct or incorrect is open to argument. Many of Dommen's criticisms are devastating, but he is always fair-minded in pointing out that — whether we should or should not have reacted as we did — we were up against an enemy demanding and planning total victory.

I just hope that if any of you have a senator or representative who is wandering around complaining about the "Secret War in Laos," you will send him this book for Christmas.

Troops' Families Leave Laos CIA Base

By D. E. Ronk

Special to The Washington Post

VIENTIANE, Dec. 22—

Frightened families of CIA-supported Meo irregulars at Long Cheng, one hundred miles north of here, have been walking south from the base since yesterday morning's attack by 20 North Vietnamese commandos and in the aftermath of serious military losses on the Plain of Jars 20 miles to the northeast.

Reports reaching Vientiane from knowledgeable U.S. sources also say Air America transport planes are ferrying important equipment and material from the Meo-CIA headquarters, flying it to safety at

Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Udorn, Thailand.

A hospital at the Long Cheng base, reportedly filled to overflowing by wounded from the Plain of Jars, has also been evacuated, the sources say, though it is unclear whether it is evacuation of old patients to make room for recently wounded or a general abandonment of the hospital.

Refugee movement from Long Cheng following the attack to the northeast is confirmed by informed U.S. sources who say they have no information on evacuation of the hospital or materiel. They note, however, that the situation at Long Cheng is con-

sidered "serious—though, not desperate."

30,000 Residents

At its peak, there are about 30,000 residents of Long Cheng, most of them dependents of Meo soldiers. About 35 Americans are believed to be stationed at the base.

Along with the sapper attack yesterday, which saw three government soldiers killed, nine wounded, two American planes damaged and two structures burned, Communist forces have occupied a hilltop position less than 15 miles east of Long Cheng, informed U.S. sources said.

Capture of the hilltop, called Phou Pha Xay, puts enemy forces within easy artillery range of Long Cheng. Announcement of the loss of Phou Pha Xay, which was part of the Long Cheng defensive system, occurred during the Communist rout of Meo and Thai troops from the plain, the sources say, and was not discovered until its defenders appeared at Long Cheng yesterday.

Communist consolidation of gains made last weekend continued through Monday night when Meo and Thai irregulars abandoned their two remaining fire support bases at Sting Ray and Cobra, west and south of the plain. Communists continued ferrying troops and artillery southward along the eastern edge of the plain toward passes leading to Long Cheng.

Off the Plain

Meo and Thai irregulars are reported to be completely off the plain now, though contact with many units has not been made. No decision on where to establish new defensive positions about Long Cheng has been reached, informed sources say, since pro-government forces have not completed regrouping off the plain.

The deteriorated situation

northeast of Long Cheng, coupled with the first commando attack on Long Cheng in more than a year, is given as cause for evacuation of the base's civilian inhabitants.

Although weather over Northern Laos is now clearing, no chance is given for pro-government forces to counter-attack onto the plain and little chance that Lao and American air forces could inflict meaningful casualties on Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops because they are dispersed.

Saigon to Release

689 Political Prisoners

From News Dispatches

SAIGON, Dec. 22 — The South Vietnamese government will release 689 civilians arrested on suspicion of Communist political activity and held without trials for up to two years on Christmas Day, a spokesman announced today.

The amnesty, however, will not affect Vietnam's two most famous political prisoners—Truong Dinh Dzu and Tran Ngoc Chau he said. Both were tried and convicted by military courts.

The spokesman said the prisoners were seized under the three-year-old Phoenix program, a joint U.S.-South Vietnamese anti-insurgency operation.

The Saigon command and U.S. spokesmen here reported little military action in South Vietnam, but fighting continued in Cambodia 46 miles north of Phnom Penh.

A Cambodian spokesman said a battle for the riverside village of Peam Chhkork entered its third day. North Vietnamese forces were so close to government front lines that allied warplanes were unable to bomb and strafe effectively.

The spokesman also revealed that Cambodia had no plans for a Christmas cease-fire similar to the 24-hour truce proclaimed by South Vietnam.